

The Missing Story of Dinah

Vayishlach, the Reconciliation, tells the story of Jacob, twin brother of Esau, who you will recall deceitfully stole his brother, Esau's birthright and his father's blessing. Jacob was the younger of the two, who held onto his brother's foot in the womb. It was Jacob who donned an animal skin to fool his blind father into thinking that he was his more hairy brother, the name Esau meaning "hairy". Jacob ran away, fearing for his life.

Now, some twenty years later, he is about to meet Esau. Jacob hopes to reconcile, to heal the rifts of childhood and to be forgiven. He has gained maturity and perhaps some wisdom, yet he approaches the meeting apprehensively. How will Esau greet him? With anger, with hostility...with force? Jacob's fears escalate, when he learns from his advance party that Esau approaches with a group of 400 men.

Hoping to placate Esau, and to avoid confrontation, Jacob sends gifts to pave the way for a warm reception. But he takes care to divide his camp into two distant parts, so that one may be saved if the other is attacked. He prepares to meet his brother alone. Jacob spends a long and lonely night filled with anxious dreams. And it is written in Genesis 32, that "a man wrestled with him until the rise of dawn."

We can understand and relate to Jacob's turmoil if we recall our own difficulties anticipating upcoming confrontations with someone difficult to deal with or whom we have wronged. Our anxiety prompts restlessness and worry. We toss and turn, expecting the worst and hoping for the best. Our sleep is fitful, our body grows tense and stiff. We awake with an aching back or limb from the battle taking place in our mind. Our psychological imbalance takes hold and almost makes us ill.

Jacob knows he behaved badly toward his brother and feels guilty. Now he wants to make amends. He chooses to meet Esau alone, brother to brother, man to man. When the encounter finally takes place, the brothers hug and greet each other warmly.

My challenge in studying these stories is in imagining the writers' intent. What did they mean and what did they hope to teach by this story? As always, there are many interpretations. And in these post-Freudian times, the power of dreams and imagination play a major part in interpretation.

Is Jacob wrestling with God? With an angel? Or as Rabbi Chanina believes: the guardian angel of Esau? Was the man Esau himself?

Rabbi Zoe Klein suggests "the man" in the dream was in fact his brother Esau. She points out that Jacob's telling Esau when they do finally meet: "to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis 33:10) implies that he did wrestle with Esau overnight. When Esau sees the growth and maturity in his twin, he gives him the name "Israel", one that is far more heroic than Jacob, which means "the trickster."

Rabbi Klein writes that many commentators see the man who comes to Jacob as divine -- “because it is easier to wrestle with God than.....with each other.”

Yet another approach and the one most plausible to me -- is taken by Rabbi Jan Katzew who argues that Jacob was wrestling with himself, and his own nature -- with the dark side that he wants to change. Perhaps for the first time in his life he meets an opponent he cannot fool – himself.

She suggests that he is both Jacob, the tricky one, and Israel, the new person he has become following that tumultuous night. His new name and self symbolize the humane being he has become. His struggle reflects the “eternal wrestling match that involves selfishness and selflessness, deception and reflection, being a heel and being a hero.”

The second part of Vayishlach tells the story of The Rape of Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob and Leah, who meets with the Canaanite daughters. Hamor, their ruler, has a son, named Shekhem, who sees Dinah and decides he must have her. He rapes her and then wants to marry her.

Jacob is shocked to learn of the abuse of his daughter and wants his sons to take action. His sons offer to form an alliance between the two tribes, on condition that the Canaanite men submit to circumcision. Thus they would identify and become one with Jacob’s people. (Imagine the salesmanship it took to sell that idea!)

Reluctantly, they agree to this condition. Jacob’s sons betray the Canaanites while they are weak and in recovery from this cruelest cut of all. They kill the men, and

take their livestock, women and children. Jacob/Israel is outraged by this deception and fears the loss of his reputation and that of his people.

What is missing from this tale is Dinah's side of the story. It would take a few thousand years and an exceptionally imaginative writer to weave a tale of Dinah and her life and times. Anita Diamant does so brilliantly in **THE RED TENT**, published in 1997. She creates a story told by Dinah of women coming together in a tent, during their separation time away from men – that is, during menstruation and childbirth. They form close connections, teaching and supporting and finding strength in one another throughout their lives. Dinah becomes a prophetess and a midwife and earns great respect for her talents.

Our biblical writers had little to say of women, but instead told stories and set examples from the behavior of men. Is it testosterone that accounts for the treachery, brutality, and murder which permeate so many stories?

As I worked on these ancient tales I wondered: is there a link between these stories and the political situation we are in - currently in Iraq? This brutal and unjust war, in which our youth are being killed and Iraqis are killing each other? Is there a link between this “warrior mode” of our leadership and the Bible-thumping going on across the United States? I suspect there may be.

Sherri Richards, 12/9/06

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